



# Materialism, life-satisfaction and addictive buying: Examining the causal relationships

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## ABSTRACT

There is a widespread consensus in the literature as to the interrelations between materialism, life satisfaction and addictive buying. The field of study, however, requires models that throw light on the channels of influence existing among these variables. The main objective of the present study was therefore to examine the mediational role of life satisfaction on the relationship between materialism dimensions and addictive buying. The results obtained from a structural equation analysis using a sample of 469 women partially confirm the suitability of the mediating variable model proposed. Specifically, life satisfaction channels the influence of the facets of success and happiness in addictive buying while the acquisition importance dimension has a direct effect on addictive buying. Finally, results are discussed and potential avenues for further research are suggested.

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## 1. Introduction

Over the last few decades, materialism has become one of the personal values that has aroused the greatest interest among both scholars and researchers (Griffin, Babin, & Christensen, 2004). This construct is defined by Richins and Dawson (1992) as a set of centrally held beliefs about the importance of possessions in one's life. It consists of three dimensions: (a) *Centrality*, materialists place possessions and their acquisition at the center of their lives, (b) *success*, materialists tend to judge their own and others' success by the number and quality of possessions accumulated, and (c) *happiness*, materialists view possessions and their acquisition as essential to their satisfaction and well-being. According to Richins and Dawson's proposal, persons high in materialism have a central goal of acquiring material goods. The acquisition and possession of material objects is very important to their self-definition, success, and well-being.

From a historical perspective, two research approaches on materialism have received the greatest attention from the scientific community: one, the study of the materialism-subjective well-being association (e.g., Burroughs & Rindfleisch, 2002; Christopher, Saliba, & Deadmarsh, 2009) and, two, the analysis of the connections between materialism and a variety of behavioral problems (e.g., Vansteenkiste, Duriez, Simons, & Soenens, 2006). As to the latter trend, many studies have empirically found materialism to be an important risk factor in conduct-problem development

(see, for instance, Kasser & Ryan, 1993; Vansteenkiste et al., 2006). Furthermore, while some researchers (e.g., Kasser & Ryan, 2001) have found the explanatory prominence of materialism in chemical addictions (tobacco, alcohol, marijuana), there have also been some (e.g., Dittmar, 2005a; Mowen, Fang, & Scott, 2009) who have associated this personal construct to behavioral addictions (notably, pathological gambling and addictive buying). Indeed, in recent years, the study of the association between the concern for possessing material objects (materialism, *in strictu sensu*) and compulsive buying has become as one of the most important and most promising aspects of research on addictive buying (e.g., Dittmar, 2005a, 2005b; Mowen & Spears, 1999).

Addictive buying has been conceptualized as "a behavioral style with a strong impulsive-compulsive component to it, of a chronic nature, that utilizes buying as the best way to face up to negative emotionality and try to find more satisfactory, cognitive-emotional states" (Otero-López & Villardefrancos, 2009, p. 62). Empirical evidence is consistent regarding the evidence that materialism is positively associated with acquisitive disorders (along other determining factors: anxiety, depression, impulsiveness, sensation seeking; see O'Guinn & Faber, 1989; Troisi, Christopher, & Marek, 2006). Furthermore, materialism becomes a powerful predictor of compulsive buying (e.g., Dittmar, 2008). An instance of this is the study by Dittmar (2005a) who, using different sample groups (330 self-reported compulsive buyers, 250 consumer panelists and 195 adolescents), examined the explanatory capability of materialism when included alongside other variables (gender, age, academic achievement, having a credit card). The author concluded that materialism is the main predictor of addictive buying in every group analyzed.

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As to the other approach mentioned above (the materialism – subjective well-being association), a variety of well-being indicators have been explored in connection with this personal construct. Thus, the study of the associations between materialism and anxiety (e.g., Kasser & Ahuvia, 2002), depression (e.g., Wachtel & Blatt, 1990), happiness (e.g., Belk, 1985), and vitality (e.g., Kasser & Ryan, 1993) were just some examples of the research on which the current consensus that materialistic persons show lower levels of subjective well-being is based (e.g., Belk, 1985; Christopher et al., 2009; Sirgy, 1998). In any case, it should be underscored that life satisfaction as much as “a global assessment of a person's quality of life according to his chosen criteria” (Shin & Johnson, 1978) it is one of the subjective well-being indicators that, over the last few decades, has attracted greater attention in connection with materialism. Conclusions are extremely consistent regarding the negative co-variation between both personal constructs (e.g., Wright & Larsen, 1993). Roberts and Clement (2007) in a recent study have found that each and every dimension of materialism – success, centrality, and happiness – as well as the total score for this variable, is inversely associated with perceived life satisfaction regarding a variety of domains (e.g., health, financial concerns, interpersonal relationships).

A final association that must not be lost sight of in view of the final goal of this study is the life satisfaction-addictive buying association. There is ample empirical evidence as regards its boosting role of negative affection (whether under the rubric of anxiety, depression, and impulsivity) in this phenomenon (Edwards, 1992; Faber & Christenson, 1996). However, other variables, such as life satisfaction, that are also part of subjective well-being, have received less attention. In any case, the recent study by Silvera, Lavack, and Kropp (2008) found, from a sample of 277 students, that life satisfaction was a valid predictor for addictive buying.

In short, previous literature has documented the strength of the associations, both associatively and predictively, between materialism and addictive buying (e.g., Dittmar, 2008), between materialism and subjective well-being (e.g., Burroughs & Rindfleisch, 2002), and between subjective well-being and addictive buying behavior (Silvera et al., 2008). In spite of this and despite the undeniable breakthroughs in the last few decades as to the empirical finding of the materialism-subjective well-being-buying addiction connection, one of the needs of this field is to integrate these variables into explanatory models that account for the paths followed by the different influences playing a role in the addictive phenomenon. In this regard, this study seeks to test a model where life satisfaction is predicted to mediate the association between materialism and addictive buying. This proposal, as is to be expected, has its foundations and stems from causal models that have been already tested in the literature. Before duly reviewing such causal approaches and preserving the mediating role of subjective well-being, the main innovation of our proposal is to be found in that it is life satisfaction as opposed to the already tested anxiety (Edwards, 1992) that is the element filtering the influences of materialism.

The review of causal literature is solid as regards the fact that materialism is an antecedent variable that has either a direct incidence (see, for instance, Mowen & Spears, 1999) or an indirect incidence (through subjective well-being) in addictive buying. Specifically, the mediating role of well-being (essentially of the facets of negative emotionality) has been demonstrated in this phenomenon. A case in point in this regard is the study by Edwards (1992) who, from a sample of 104 buying addicts, tested a model of causal relationships in which anxiety channels the influence of materialism in compulsive buying.

In other words, and on the basis of the previous literature, it seems both fair and plausible to conduct a study that gives the “mediating role” to life satisfaction. Therefore, this component of

subjective well-being becomes the one that filters the influence of materialism on addictive buying. In this regard, the underlying hypothesis is that the presence of materialistic values would have a negative impact on life satisfaction, this impairment to life satisfaction being the one that would increase the risk of buying addiction. Specifically, the core objective of this study similar to the approach taken by Edwards (1992), is the empirical testing of a model of relations that sees life satisfaction as a mediating variable of the influence of the different dimensions of materialism (success, centrality and happiness) in addictive buying.

## 2. Method

### 2.1. Participants

A convenience sample of 469 women from the Autonomous Community of Galicia (Spain) was recruited. As to the respondents' characteristics, the following should be noted: the range of age is between 25 and 65 years (mean age = 37.3 SD = 5, 7). As regards marital status, 62.05% of respondents were married, 23.88% were single, and the remainder were divorced or widowed (for further details see Otero-López & Villardefrancos, 2009).

### 2.2. Procedure

This study is part of a wide spectrum research project on the phenomenon of addictive buying and its associated psychological variables among the Galician population. Sample collection was conducted between September 2008 and June 2009. Questionnaires were administered by both personnel from the research project and hired personnel, who collaborated on field work after a training period. The anonymity and confidentiality of reports was guaranteed. Volunteer participants were given information on how to complete the questionnaires and a period of time was set (3–4 weeks) for posting the questionnaires back (respondents were given a pre-addressed, postage paid envelope). The return rate was 41.3%.

### 2.3. Measures

#### 2.3.1. Addictive buying

Participants completed the Spanish translation version (Reisch, 2001) of the 16-item German Addictive Buying Scale (GABS; Scherhorn, Reisch, & Raab, 1990). Examples of items from this scale include “When I have money I have to spend it”, “Sometimes I buy something that I cannot afford”, “I am lavish”.

The answer options ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 4 (strongly agree) and the summation of responses would be an indicator of involvement in addictive buying. The internal consistency indices of this scale calculated using Cronbach's alpha coefficient ranged between 0.80 and 0.92 (Scherhorn et al., 1990). For this sample,  $\alpha = .92$ .

#### 2.3.2. Life satisfaction

The Spanish version (Atienza, Balaguer, & García-Merita, 2003) of the Satisfaction with Life Scale (SWLS; Diener, Emmons, Larsen, & Griffin, 1985) was used to assess perceived global life satisfaction. This measure includes five statements (e.g., “I am satisfied with my life”, “In most ways my life is close to my ideal”) and respondents indicate their agreement on a scale of 0 (strongly disagree) to 3 (strongly agree). Diener et al. (1985) found adequate levels of internal consistency, Cronbach's alpha coefficient being of .87. In the current study,  $\alpha = .86$ .

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